

BOSTON OF ETTRICK AS OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLAR

BY THE REV. D. M. G. STALKER, B.D.

IN 1738 there was published in Amsterdam, by the house of J. Wetstein and G. Smith, a book with this title : Thomae Boston, Ecclesiae Atracensis apud Scotos pastoris, *Tractatus Stigmologicus, Hebraeo-Biblicus. Quo Accentuum Hebraeorum doctrina traditur, variusque eorum, in explanda S. Scriptura, usus exponitur. Cum praefatione Viri reverendi et clarissimi Davidis Millii.*—"A treatise on the Biblical-Hebrew points, dealing with the Hebrew accents and their different uses in setting forth Holy Scripture, by Thomas Boston, minister of the Church of Ettrick, in Scotland, with a preface by the reverend and renowned David Mill." It is with this book I am to deal in this paper, and since it is little known—it is not included in McMillan's edition of the Collected Works—I shall simply give you an idea of what it contains.

Hebrew accentuation and pointing was not just a private study of Boston's own. It was a subject of quite wide-spread interest in his time. This is made clear in the Preface to the *Tractate*, by Mill. Calling it "a well-known controversy," he says: "there are those who violently oppose the Biblical accents, and despise them, such as the Capelli, the Simonii, the Clerici and others" (p. 1), while, over against them, there are those who take the side of attaching great importance to the accents, like the Buxtorfii, the Ouselii, the Bohlii, the Laescheri, the Dachselii. Mill does not think the arguments of the first class—against the importance of the accents—well-grounded. They depend often, he suggests, on hasty judgment, or partisanship, or even, he says, on ignorance. And he says further that it cannot be reasonably maintained that the accents are simply a device of the more recent Jews. For one thing, history is against that view. And, for a second, the more recent Jews themselves confess that they have lost a great part of the knowledge of the accents they once had. But, on the other hand, Mill will not go so far as to say, as some did, that the origin and the authority of the accents was from God. "*Nec propterea tamen divinam prorsus originem et auctoritatem accentibus affere audeo.*" Neither are the characters themselves of divine origin, nor is there any clear inspiration in the accents. "The function of the latter is simply," he says, "to separate or bring together, and to indicate emphasis, ellipse, and the like." "The power (sc. of devising the accents),"

he gives as his view, "should be regarded as inherent in a clear-headed and highly-skilled interpreter who is well-versed in the language, such as the ancient Hebrews certainly were, rather than recourse had to the supreme miracle of inspiration (*summum id Θεοπνευστικὸν miraculum*). It is for that reason that, if a careful and close observing of all the accents leads to a weakened or obscure meaning, and an exposition that chooses to disregard them gets a meaning that better suits the words and sense and analogy, I have no fault to find with it, provided it is done within due limits, and in the fear of the Lord."

It was into this controversy then, quite wide-spread and handled by distinguished scholars, that Thomas Boston entered with the *Tractatus Stigmologicus*. His views are given mainly in the 6th Chapter of the 1st Part, and I will summarise them briefly.

Starting out from the axiom that the accents are the "guides of the grammatical sense (*Sensus grammatici moderatores*)," he takes up the reverse position from that of Mill which we have just seen. "All translation," he says, "of a Hebrew text must be according to the rule and letter of the accentuation, and no grammatical construction of a text is to be regarded as right or genuine which does not agree with the accentuation." And he quotes Rabbi ben Ezra, whom he has from Buxtorf: "*Quaecumque expositio non fuerit juxta rationem accentuum, ne acquiescito ei neque audias eam.*"

The reason he gives for taking up this position is the following: There is found in the Old Testament, he says, a system of heavenly doctrine, which is in keeping with the wisdom and holiness of the divine nature, and in harmony with the doctrine of the New Testament, and the ordinances of divine revelation everywhere. This doctrine is such that we understand it not at all by conjecture, but by the application of fixed rules. If then this system is marked by accents that guide and define the sense, who could be induced to believe that this was not the very purpose for which the accents were ordained and written in? He himself at any rate, Boston avers, could sooner be brought to believe that the Temple of Diana had been built by a chance combination of atoms.

From this follows the position which we think of as characteristic of him. "Since it is the accents that guide and define the meaning of the Hebrew text, it is established that the accentual system of the Old Testament has the same divine origin and the same divine authority as the words. Both have the same author, the Holy Spirit, under whose infallible guidance the sacred authors committed the Word of God to writing. Therefore the accentuation as well as the words are to be regarded as inspired."

This position establishes for Boston an important and necessary consequence. Since the sense of Holy Scripture is the revealed mind of God, that by which men are directed to their chief and ultimate end, there can be no true revelation of that mind except by the Holy Spirit Himself. "The things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God." Therefore the accentuation, as being the guide of the Hebrew part of the Scriptures, must have been derived from the Holy Spirit Himself, by whose power the sacred writers were inspired.

Boston then goes on to bring a further proof of his contention. An instrument for understanding the Divine Mind that is true, he says, has undoubtedly divine inspiration. Now the accentuation is an instrument of that sort. For, since the meaning of the original text is a revelation of the mind of God, because the accentuation guides and defines that meaning, it is a true instrument, and therefore divinely inspired.

Boston then gives one final proof, as it were by contrary. If, he says, the accentuation were a device of men, a human device, then the meaning of Scripture, since it is given by the help of the accentuation, would be a human one. But human opinions cannot be any proper foundation for faith in God. Either we must attribute the accentual system to the Holy Spirit, or else agree that the sense of the text which is given by it is no higher than the opinions of commentators.

Boston then turns to the view that the inventors of the accentual system were the Massoretes of Tiberias in the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th centuries.

If that view were the true one, he argues, then Scripture would resolve itself into traditions taken over from Moses and the Prophets, handed on to the Massoretes, and communicated to us by means of the accents which they added. But how is it conceivable, he asks, that in the course of so many centuries of transmission, the tradition could have remained pure and uncorrupted? Even if it *came into* the Massoretes' hands pure and uncorrupted, what guarantee is there that it *left* them so? No, Boston says, if the accents are simply the work of the Massoretes, and not of the Holy Spirit, then their only use is to tell how the Massoretes interpreted Holy Scripture. And the Massoretes' interpretation is not a divine one, but merely human.

But there is a second objection to this view. If it were true, and the accents were the work of the Massoretes, it would mean that the Church is, for her interpretation of the Old Testament, in the debt of the "blinded Jews, the open enemies of our Lord Jesus Christ and His Gospel." That, Boston says, is incredible. He is ready to admit that the Jews have been careful, and still are careful, in their handling of the sacred Hebrew text, and that as far as concerns prophetic oracles which look to Messiah and depict him, they have preserved these uncorrupted and unharmed, in

spite of their hatred of Christianity. That is a shining proof of their good faith, even if what led them to the preservation was the action of Divine Providence, which intended that these oracles should be of advantage to the Church. But could we expect that notes in the text which establish Christianity and oppose Judaism could have their origin from them? An unpointed text, to which they were to add accents, would have, through its obscurities and ambiguities, furnished the Jews with opportunities of evading many of the arguments of the Christians. "We were ordered," said Rabbi Bechai, "not to point the Books of the Law, because a pointed text wholly precludes variety and diversity of meaning, while removal of the points lays these open." After the Jews had remained unbelieving during the 400 or 500 years when they had had the light of the Church to illuminate them, it passes credence that the Massorettes should so have acted as to build up the Christian faith while at the same time destroying their own.

Boston will not admit either the argument which tries to keep the Massoretic derivation by saying that the Massorettes acted beyond what they knew. It is not a case of Balaam over again. On the contrary, it is absurd, monstrous, and in the highest degree derogatory to the excellence of the heavenly mysteries revealed in the New Testament to suppose that infidels, as they worked at the Sacred Text, could have been led so to work as to build up the Christian religion unknown to themselves. Anyone who can be induced to believe that, Boston says, is the twin of him who would believe the story that a potter busy making a clay jar suddenly found that he had chanced to being into being a second world!

Boston then goes on to distinguish between the vowel points, which determine the meaning of the individual words, and the accents, like *Athnah*, *Methegh*, *Rebhia*, which set the words in their context, and lays down that the arguments which establish the primeval antiquity and divine origin and authority of the former establish these also for the latter. Because the former depend upon the latter. The vowel points are altered by the accents, but the accents are not altered by the vowel points.

That means that, in the order of nature, and of time too, Boston has no doubt, Hebrew was furnished with accents earlier than with vowels. The rule comes before the thing ruled. Therefore there is no point in admitting a divine origin in the case of the accents, but denying it in the case of the vowels. The destruction of the thing ruled does not destroy the thing which is the ruler.

This, in Boston's eyes, is important. He has himself, he says, no doubt about the origin of the vowels. It is from God. But there are those who take the view that the quiescent letters once acted as the vowels, and that their place was later taken by the points, the substitution being

made, according to some, by the Massoretes, according to others, about the time of Ezra. Of such a thing, Boston says, there is no trace. Nor could there be. If the Hebrew text had no *accents* in the time of Ezra or the Massoretes, it could not have had vowels either. For the vowel punctuation is guided by the accents.

While he is referring to Ezra and to the Massoretes, Boston turns aside for a moment to make a point which he considers of importance. It would be, as he has already said, an injury to the dignity of Scripture to attribute the pointing of the Hebrew text to the Massoretes, since they were Jews cast off by God for their unbelief, and enemies of the Christian name. That objection does not apply to Ezra, who was one of the writers of the sacred text and inspired by the Holy Spirit. If it was he who added the accents, they have divine authority. Indeed, it is not of much importance, in Boston's view, whether we believe that each individual writer of Scripture himself put in the accents in the book he wrote—for he was simply an amanuensis of the Holy Spirit—or whether all the accents, from beginning to end, were put in by Ezra. For the divine authority of them is conserved in either case.

Boston then goes on to another sort of argument for his position. If the Hebrew text were originally unpointed, he cannot understand, he says, how the priests who, according to Deut 31, 10-12, every seventh year read the Law to the whole of Israel, were able to read such a text easily and correctly, and in such a way that the whole people, the women and children not excepted, were able to learn it. Still less can he understand how an ordinary Jew was able to read such a text, as he was ordered to do in ch. 6, v. 7, and to teach it to his children. How, too, could such a text be put into the hands of children of five, as the well-known Jewish saying informs us was done. And, above all, how could Shaphan have done what he is said to have done in 2 Kings 22, 10-11—read aloud the newly discovered Book of the Law to the king, which had been out of mind in the period of the apostacy? Because it is to be remembered that if there were no accents, there were also no vowel-points. Boston agrees that the reading of a Hebrew text which laboured under these handicaps would not have been so difficult to the Jews themselves as to foreigners. But suppose our vernacular texts were got up in the same way as the Hebrew Texts of the time? Suppose someone were handed a chapter of the Bible to read aloud which, though it was written in his own language, had no punctuation marks to indicate the relation of the sentences to each other, or of the words within the sentence, and as well no capital letters—with a text like that no one, Boston holds, would be adequate to reading to an audience distinctly and accurately, easily and fluently, unless, indeed, he had a prodigious memory. And that is not, Boston says, putting the difficulty at its sharpest. To make the com-

parison accurate, we must go further and imagine that what our reader in the vernacular is asked to rehearse is a *new copy* of the law written out in this inconvenient way, and he has never seen it written out in any other way, since the time at which he is set to read it is the time when the Church has just thrown off the power of the Popes, under whom the Bible was not known. We must consider, too, that if some of the punctuation marks are absent, there will be variation in the pronunciation of certain words, as there is in the Hebrew of the Bible. And we must suppose finally that in the book which is written in this fashion there are, instead of 14 different vowel-signs, three, or at most four, and they used also as letters. In conditions like these the reader must, by dint of memory, and with the help of these three or four different letters, reproduce the true and genuine forms and pronunciation which have come to be accepted through the ages, and in his reading aloud to the people do it accurately and fluently. "Hercules forced his way through the waters of Acheron," Boston says, "but I am afraid that this man would stick!"

He then goes on to meet another objection brought against his view. The Rabbinic commentaries are read unpointed, and so are the copies of the Old Testament used in the Synagogue. Boston admits that. But he says there is a difference between these and Holy Scripture. As far as concerns the writings of the Rabbis, they are not the foundation of Faith, and error in connection with them does not bring salvation into danger. As for the other, the unpointed texts of the Old Testament used in the Jewish synagogues, they are read only by the Doctors, and these have made themselves equal to the reading of the unpointed Bible there because of their continual practice from youth upwards in the reading of the pointed. Moreover, there is no doubt that in the Synagogue reading attention is paid to the sound rather than to the meaning.

Boston then goes back to a matter which he has mentioned already, the view held by some that the pointing was first introduced about the time of Ezra. If that is true, he says, and priests and people before the time of Ezra did read from texts that had neither accents nor vowels, then for the true and accurate reading, as well as for the grammatical sense, they were dependent on tradition, with the exception of those, priests and people alike, who were immediately instructed by the prophets speaking under divine inspiration.

This is evidently a subject which interested Boston considerably, for he goes on to deal with it at some length. Those who hold the accentual and vowel points to be the invention of the Massorettes of Tiberias are quite ready, he says, to admit that both before and after the time of Ezra the grammatical sense of the Hebrew text depended upon tradition. "It is a firm and ancient opinion of the Rabbis," he quotes *vir Doctus*

as saying, "that the Law was written by Moses without pointing, without accents, without paragraph divisions, without verses, without even separation between the words. It is probable that the separation of the words was done by Ezra, but the mass of points and accents has been shown to be later than the Talmud." (*Introd. as Lect. Ling. Orient.*, p. 28.)

Boston however will not agree that the points and accents are later than the Talmud. There is explicit mention of accents there. "It is disputed in the Talmud whether money can be taken for teaching the Law. R. Jochanan says, "It can be taken for the pause of the accents, a phrase which Raschi explains in the margin as meaning, for the punctuation and the accents." And he gives another instance from Nedarim, where it is asked why a certain operation is done with the left and not with the right hand, and the answer in Berachoth is, "because the accents of the law so indicate." The Rabbis, Boston says, were not so stupid as to worry themselves whether pay could be taken for teaching something that did not yet exist, while accents which had not yet been devised could not direct either the right or the left hand.

Boston then brings another objection to the view that the accents were not original but late, an objection rather off the line of his argument, but apposite to the times in which he himself lived. If the pointing was introduced only in the 5th century A.D., and if, on its introduction, it was made to harmonise with the traditional interpretation, that means that all the articles of the Christian Creed rest, as far as concerns the Old Testament, on tradition. This, says Boston, was the position of the Pharisees, and it is the position of some of the Popes, who build upon tradition for their own advantage. And that explains why many of the Popes, though not all, have gone "hand and foot"—the phrase is Boston's own—in support of the view that the accents were the invention of the Massoretes.

Boston then states his own view. Each writer in the Old Testament, being *amanuensis Spiritus Sancti*, wrote his books pointed, and if in the course of time unpointed copies appeared, that method of writing was not original, but due to the labour involved in copying out a pointed text. And Boston has little patience with an unpointed text, because, he says, it leads simply to inaccuracy. "When a word is pointed," he quotes R. Bechai with approval, "it admits of only one meaning. But when it is unpointed, many meanings, and they admirable and excellent, can be read into it."

Hebrew accents and points, then, go back to God. The Bible is the plan of salvation. Salvation is of such moment that there must be no dubiety or possibility of error connected with it. Therefore in the Old Testament there must not be any human element. That there would be if the accents and points were the invention of men, for they guide and

indicate the meaning. So, Boston concludes, the points and accents are not to be thought of as derived from Ezra, or the Massorettes of Tiberias, or anyone like that, but from the Holy Spirit Himself. And that will be clear to anyone who lays aside prejudice and preconceived opinions, and comes and considers this question with faith, humility, self-denial and trust in God.

What I have given in this paper is only a very small part of the whole content of the *Tractatus Stigmologicus*. The main part of it is taken up with giving the uses, with examples, of the different accents and signs, and it would be interesting to work through one or two of the chapters at least and see how far modern scholarship would lend support to his views. Another interesting study would be to work through the books he gives as authorities, and see to what extent Boston was in this department an original thinker. It would be interesting also to know if there were others in Scotland in his time who shared his preoccupation with this subject. And perhaps as interesting a study as any would be to examine Boston's own expositions of the Old Testament, to see how far he paid himself that strict regard to the accents which he lays down as obligatory. In this connection, there is a note at the end of David Mill's Preface which I should like to know more about. After saying that in the *Tractatus*, Boston gives the theory of Hebrew accentuation, he goes on to mention a book in which Boston has also tried to illustrate his views. A footnote in English gives this description of it: "An Essay on the first twenty-three chapters of the Book of Genesis: in a twofold Version of the Original Text. The one rigidly literal; and that according to the formal signification of the words, as they are used by the inspired Penmen: the other more smooth, exhibiting the sense of the phraseology of the former, but not departing from the letter without necessity: both done with strict regard to the most accurate Hebrew pointing or Stigmatologie, expressed in the Versions, by equivalent stops fitted thereto." I am quite unable to trace any such book by Boston, and I would be glad if anyone could tell me anything about it.

Another thing I am unable to discover is what awakened Boston's interest in the subject of Hebrew pointing. It may have been the works of John Wemyss of Lathocker, for he says in his *Memoirs* (p. 17) that one of the first books for which he had a fondness when he became a student of theology was *The Christian Synagogue*. But on the next page he says, "I was also for a while at that time, I suppose, with Mr. Alexander Rule, professor of Hebrew, but remember no remarkable advantage I had thereby."